

# Robert Altman's Feminism: The Treatment of Women in His 1970s Films & 3 Women (1977)

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## INTRODUCTION

In the scholarly study of American film's New Hollywood era, occurring from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, director Robert Altman's work is not discussed as much as his contemporaries, such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. While an innovator of directorial style, Robert Altman was also unique in the inclusion and positive portrayal of women in his films.

### MY GOAL

After comparing Altman's films to other films of the New Hollywood period, I believe that Altman's films have a feminist quality. By analyzing the role and treatment of women in his 1970s film, I submit that Altman's films should also be analyzed through a feminist lens. However Altman's perspective is not in complete accord with Second Wave feminist goals. Therefore, I define Altman's form of feminism as "Altman's Feminism." For my thesis, I utilized a feminist psychoanalytic lens, specifically referring to Laura Mulvey's famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," to argue that *3 Women* (1977) is an "Altman Feminist" film.



## BACKGROUND

### WOMEN IN THE NEW HOLLYWOOD ERA

The New Hollywood era's films typically center around men and pose questions about masculinity, such as *The Godfather* (1972), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). These New Hollywood films tend to be misogynistic. Such treatment is at odds with the social context of the era, specifically the women's liberation movement.

Women's treatment and representation in film during this era was, what film critic Molly Haskell has stated, rather "ambiguous." While there are a few "feminist-inspired films" (Haskell) with female protagonist stories, such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), and *Klute* (1971), overall women are either not represented at all or portrayed very negatively.

Women in the New Hollywood era tend to be either demonized or sexualized. Examples of canonical films from the era that sexualize or demonize women include *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), respectively.

Aside from the few female protagonist driven films, the New Hollywood era was not kind to women.

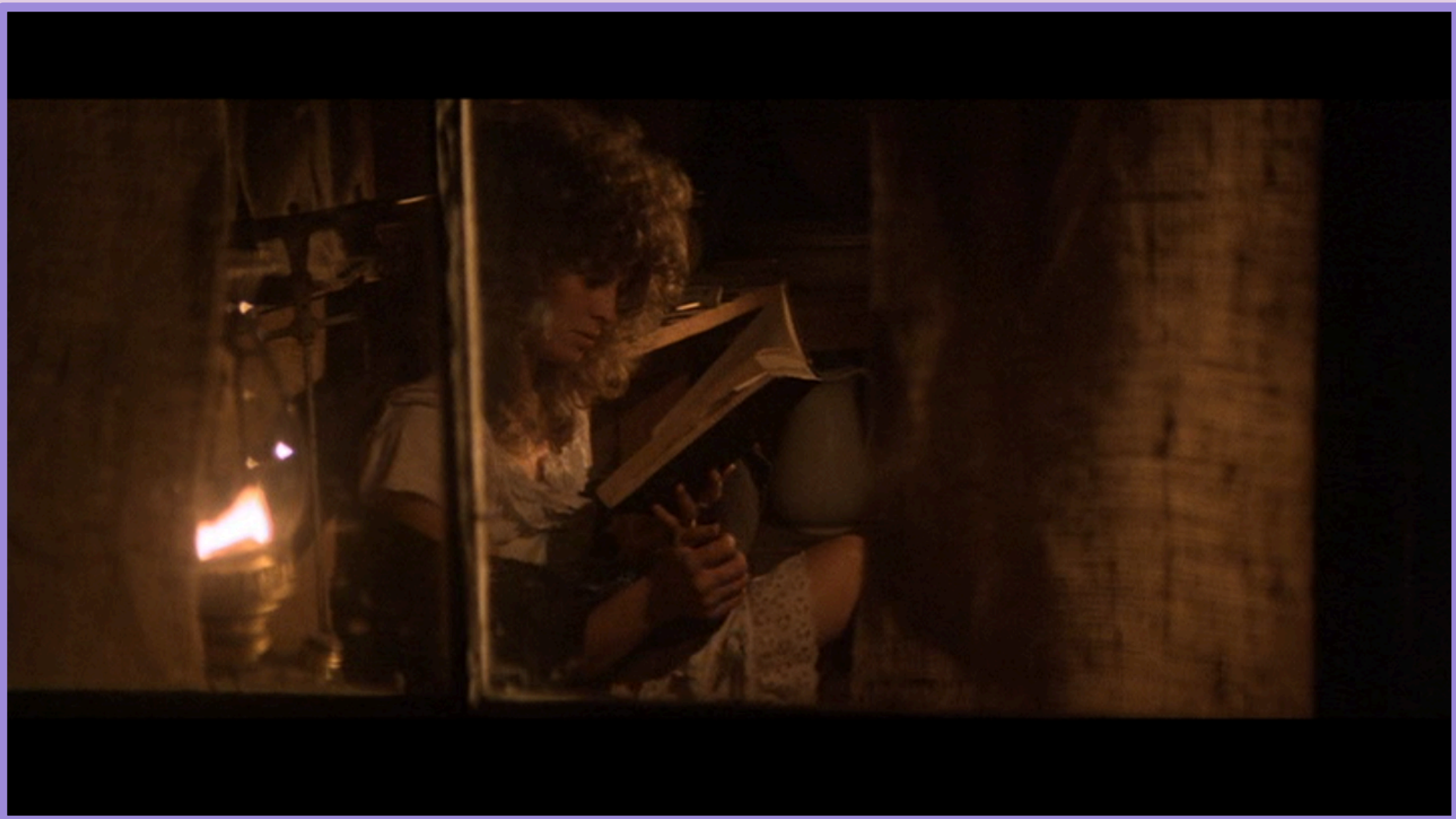
## METHODOLOGY: "ALTMAN'S FEMINISM"

In review of Altman's filmmaking during the 1970s, I argue that Altman's films display a perspective of feminism called "Altman's Feminism." Except for his commercial hit *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), all of Altman's 1970s can arguably be labeled as "Altman Feminist."

What is "Altman's Feminism"? After examining the portrayal, the roles, and the relationships of women in Altman's 1970s films, I define "Altman's Feminism" as either the sole or equal focus on the female characters whose presence furthers the narrative, are treated with respect and/or sympathy, and are given traits that label them as a subject rather than a sexual object.

The two films I discuss in my thesis that best exemplify "Altman's Feminism" are *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Nashville* (1975). For *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, the inclusion of Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie), pictured below, depicts a "new view of the West" as seen through the female perspective (Self). Further she is much more business savvy than McCabe, who, in contrast, is presented as dimwitted.

In *Nashville*, the women are presented as more logical and caring whereas the men are depicted as conceited and greedy. The film arguably centers around country singer Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakely) and her actions. As seen through the close-ups of Jean as she sings, the film is much more sympathetic to Jean than her male counterparts. Overall, Jean's character demonstrates the destructive hold on women by patriarchal society.



## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND "VISUAL PLEASURE AND NARRATIVE CINEMA"

I chose to analyze *3 Women* through a feminist psychoanalytic framework. For my thesis, I focused on one text, Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking feminist film theory essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." I chose this text because it is considered to be one of the founding texts of feminist film theory.

Critical points in Mulvey's essay that are important to my research include:

- "identification with the image seen" (715) and mirrors
- The two avenues of escape from castration anxiety (718)
- "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (711)
- The call to a new avenue for feminist filmmaking by "free[ing] the look of the camera" (722)

## 3 WOMEN (1977)

### ESCAPE FROM CLASSICAL NARRATIVE CINEMA

*3 Women* is classified as one of Altman's personal films. These personal films can also be categorized as art cinema. Scholar Robert T. Self defines art cinema as a form that "seeks to liberate the spatial and temporal systems from subservience to narrative cause and effect," as well as "call[ing] attention not to some story, that implicit chronology of realistic events, but to *narration*, to the explicit manner of the film's presentation" (46).

In other words, art cinema is a deliberate break from the classical narrative mode, which "situates the viewer, voyeuristically safe and distanced, as a passive, unself-conscious consumer of a story that seems to tell itself" (Self 45). Choosing such a route for *3 Women*, I argue that, in accord with the film's eventual forming of a matriarchy, *3 Women* needed to pursue an art cinema route because it breaks from "the ways the unconscious...structure ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (Mulvey 712).

### GOAL FOR ANALYSIS OF 3 WOMEN

The goal of my analysis of *3 Women* is to argue that the film is an "Altman Feminist" film because its art cinema approach criticizes patriarchy's hold on women, and allows the three women in the film to create a matriarchy. In addition, the three women are the film's protagonists and their relationships with one another and their surroundings place them at the center of the narrative. Like Mulvey's essay, the film calls for a breaking off from the existing order of male dominated society and forming a mode that depicts women as subjects rather than objects.



### SAMPLE ANALYSIS

The screenshot pictured above is an excellent example of my argument. This image occurs within minutes of the film's opening. Pinky (Sissy Spacek) is waiting in the rehabilitation spa's doctors' office and watching the female staff help the elder patients. As she looks through the window, the spectator sees a faint reflection of the scene Pinky is watching. The window simultaneously acts as a screen and mirror. While the connection of film to the screen is obvious, Christian Metz writes that "film is like mirror," (696) solidifying the link between screen and mirror in the opening moments of the film. Already the connection between the medium of film itself and female spectatorship is acknowledged.

The following image is a medium long shot of Millie (Shelley Duvall) helping one of the elder patients. Because the window also serves as a mirror, Pinky sees (or eventually will see) herself as Millie. This concept of reflecting images in windows can be seen in the screenshot on the right.

## CONCLUSION

Having closely analyzed these few films, I realized the importance of analyzing Altman's work through a feminist framework. The feminist psychoanalytic framework could be extended to include other theorists, such as Kaja Silverman and Teresa de Lauretis. In addition, the feminist framework can be expanded to include not just the psychoanalytic perspective, but also to other feminist frameworks, such as an intersectional lens.

Overall, my research provides substantial evidence for Altman to be considered a feminist director, specifically in his feminism. This research can be expanded to analyze all of Robert Altman's filmography.

Regardless of viewpoints of what feminism should or should not be, Altman's films maintain that women are equally represented with an equally valid perspective. Altman's female characters are treated as people, typically with respect and trust, as people with both flaws and favorable attributes. Whatever the case, Altman's films can be considered as a feminist outlet for the New Hollywood era.



## SAMPLE OF WORKS CITED

Haskell, Molly. [From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies](#). 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987.

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